

... so that through believing you may have life in his name

Acts 5:27–32

Psalm 150

Revelation 1:4–8

John 20:19–31

Text: John 20:30-31

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Introduction

David Foster Wallace was a talented American novelist and English professor widely known for his 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*. His writings, according to one biography, are dense works providing a dark, often satirical analysis of American culture. Wallace struggled with depression and, sadly, in 2008 at age 46, took his own life. We must be careful of being judgemental. Insightful descriptions of human angst about life are often borne of pain.

In 2005 Wallace gave the commencement [address](#) to the graduating class at Kenyon College (Ohio). Wallace, not a religious man, said that the freedom of a real education was that “you get to decide what to worship. Because here's something else that's weird but true: in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship ... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. ... Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. ... Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful, it's that they're unconscious. ... They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing.”

Wallace's observation about the importance of what we worship in life is not a recent discovery. Centuries ago the Psalms declare, "Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows," (Psalm 116:4) and, "The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands ... Those who make them and all who trust them shall become like them." (Psalm 135:15, 18) What do you worship? Or more pointedly, who do you worship? In the day-to-day trenches of life have we unconsciously slipped into worshipping things that, in Wallace's description, eat a person alive?

1. I know that it may sound a little like sacrilege to the faithful, but I am so grateful for the Apostle Thomas; thank God for Thomas! He is the skeptic in all of us. I realize that he has the moniker among Christians as 'doubting Thomas' and that Jesus said, 'blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' I wouldn't call him doubting, rather, Thomas, I would say, is a realist. He is like so many in our world who feel they need to be shown. To his fellow disciples who all testify they have seen Jesus alive, Thomas says, I don't know what you guys saw but 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

David Foster Wallace is, in some respects, like Thomas. Wallace sees people who believe and describes them as people who choose 'some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship.' But such worship is not for him; such worship requires you to swallow believing the unbelievable. And there are many like Thomas in our world; this disciple Thomas speaks for all of us skeptics. And it is worth noting that when Jesus encounters Thomas, it is Thomas who make the clearest statement of faith in all the gospels about who Jesus is; Thomas answered, "My Lord and My God." When Thomas sees Jesus alive, somehow he knows he stands in the presence of his Creator and the Lord of the Universe.

Jesus said to Thomas, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' I invite you to underline the word 'believe.' Belief, or faith, is one of the major themes of John's gospel that runs throughout the course of his writings. In the New Testament there are five books that come from the teaching of the Apostle John. Four of them are written to believers to encourage 'keep on believing'—1, 2, 3 John and Revelation. John's gospel is aimed at those outside the church; aimed at inviting people to believe in Jesus.

The theme of believing dominates this 20th chapter that describes the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The beloved disciple goes into the tomb, and sees and *believes*. Thomas declares that without sight and touch he will not believe; Jesus challenges him to be not unbelieving, but believing; Thomas declares that Jesus is his Lord and God, and Jesus responds, have you believed because you've seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. Then the author goes straight to the conclusion: these stories of Jesus are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The theme of believing that we find in this summary sentence about the purpose of the book aimed at inviting people to believe in Jesus is first stated in the prologue. Speaking of the Word (capital W) made flesh, that is Jesus of Nazareth, John writes “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” And here in the 20th chapter he brings that theme full circle inviting listeners to believe.

John calls the stories of Jesus that he chose for his book ‘signs;’ the death and resurrection of Jesus being the climax of the signs. Signs point; these signs, according to John, point us to Jesus. From the array of the post-resurrection appearance stories of Jesus that John could have chosen to include—we read of other appearance stories in the other gospels—John chose these to offer us. It seems to me that John chose the story of Thomas to invite those who find this all too fantastical to believe; Thomas was not one given to believing fantasy.

I also invite you to consider that the signs don’t prove anything. Seeing Jesus crucified and then raised from the dead does not prove that he is the Son of God. These things point. They witness. It was the personal encounter with Jesus himself that overwhelms Thomas such that he can only now exclaim, “My Lord and my God.” Jesus encountered Thomas in such a way that this worship that springs from his lips is undeniable and his only response. The story is that Jesus encounters Thomas and supplies Thomas with what he needs such that the true identity of Jesus is stamped indelibly in his being.

I note with you again—and this truth needs to be underlined continually—the resurrected living Jesus makes himself known as risen and alive to these disciples. It is Jesus who enters the room and shows himself to them—they aren’t out looking for Jesus. John makes clear, in these stories, that it was Jesus who initiated encounter with them and made himself known to them. These stories are told to bear witness to Jesus. John isn’t telling his story of experiencing Jesus alive in that

locked room because he is trying to prove something. He is bearing witness to an event that is stamped so thoroughly in his being, like Thomas, as to now be undeniable. Whether you believe John's story is another matter.

In truth, every believer since has come to believe because the risen living Jesus, Saviour of the world, makes himself known to them. John says that through believing you may have life in his name. Name, in scripture, always entails the presence, power and purpose of the person whose name is named. To impute effectiveness to Christ's name therefore is simply to say that the living Lord Jesus Christ himself is present in his purpose and power and the believer, by means of faith in him, knows Jesus to be present.

Believers today, like these first witnesses, bear witness to our living Lord's presence. In preaching, I bear witness to Him. I point. I offer you Jesus. It is my experience that somehow I know that I know Jesus. It is a mystery how, but that I know him is his doing. I have no special status or privilege. If you interviewed believers in the church pews today and asked if they know Jesus they will tell you, yes. How they know is as individual as they are individuals, but our Lord is sufficient for each of us. Some of us came to believe with a sudden jolt like Thomas when at first we refused to believe. For others it was a slow process of recognition where we finally realized, I do believe. For all of us, it is the Lord's doing.

And the great news is that if our Lord can make himself known to me he can do so for anyone. John is convinced as he writes, as I am when I preach, that the living Lord stands among us willing to make himself known to any who would believe. A great wonder is that among all these false gods in our world that lure us to unconsciously worship them, the real and only God stands before us and we can know life in his name, meaning life in his presence and power and purpose. Will you believe? I suppose that Thomas could have continued in his unbelief even as Jesus stands before him. Instead he receives Jesus' invitation to give up his unbelieving and believe.

2. In the commencement address by David Wallace that I referenced at the beginning of this sermon Wallace said, "But the insidious thing about these forms of worship (that eat you alive) is not that they're evil or sinful, it's that they're unconscious." I would agree with Wallace that these are often unconscious for people and it is good to consider that and bring unconscious worship to light that may indeed be eating us alive. The other point I would raise is that the gospel asserts that it is sin to worship anything or anyone except the One God who is

worthy of our worship. This is the very definition of sin. It is also irrational—to worship something as God other than the only One who is God. It is interesting to me that Wallace can see that everyone worships something but never seems to ask why we humans are worshipping beings. Were we created for this?

The promise of believing in Jesus, according to John, is life in his name. Living in the presence and power and purpose of Jesus. I point out to you that, as John announces this good news, inviting people to believe, there is nothing in it for him...that is he has nothing to gain if people believe. Most things that are being sold in life as good for us accrues some benefit for the seller. And what does Jesus have to gain? God is not incomplete in any way as if God needs us or needs something from us. The wonder is that God chose to be for us and have a people for himself.

Note that Jesus was raised crucified—the wounds of the crucifixion are still visible. Rather than worshipping things that eat us alive it was our sin that ate Jesus alive for our sakes. In John's book Revelation, written to encourage believers to keep on believing in the face of opposition to believing, listen again to the greeting and how he describes Jesus as the one 'who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood.' He gave his life to free us from captivity to the worship of things that are not God for no other reason than that he loves us and wants good for us.

According to the gospel God's power is his achieving his purpose—acting most powerfully at the cross and then raised Jesus from the dead. Another critical instance of his power—the achieving of his purpose in his name—is to render unbelieving creatures believers. In the prologue to his written gospel John says, "To all who received Jesus, who believed in his name [nature], he gave power to become children of God" To all who seize him in faith (believe) our Lord gives power to become children of God.

David Wallace also said that we get to chose what we worship. While there is some truth to that, according to the gospel that isn't entirely accurate. The gospel says that we are lost and left, to ourselves, ever remain worshipping the gods that in the end are no gods at all. No one decides to follow Jesus in and of themselves. We haven't "decided", of ourselves, to follow Jesus the way we decide to buy one make of car instead of another or a bungalow instead of a townhouse. We are disciples inasmuch as our Lord called us, our resistance melted, and, like Thomas, we couldn't do anything else.

The question will you believe could be asked another way; will you say yes to Jesus who is making himself known to you?

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.